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The Politics of the Occult: A Conversation with Historian Mitch Horowitz

BY WILL SOLOMON



The nature of occultism is often misunderstood. Despite popular conceptions of Nazi esotericism or dark visions of the supernatural in films like *The Exorcist*, throughout modern history occult spirituality has regularly interwoven with explicitly progressive and sometimes radical social movements.

Mitch Horowitz is a historian of alternative spirituality, and in his new book, *Modern Occultism*, he presents a sprawling history of the occult, looking at its revival in Renaissance-era Europe and the threads that connect it to antiquity and the present. While he examines many different strains within occultism, including those associated with fascism, Horowitz

presents a frequently liberatory view—socially and personally—of the diverse movement.

In this interview, edited for length and clarity, we discuss the radical history of occultism, and where the occult stands in relation to politics today.

In *Modern Occultism* you write: “Occultism is, in effect, a revivalist movement. It is a reclamation and adaptation of spiritual ideas and methods that once flourished and were later suppressed by a cultural order that remains dominant. Hence there is a perpetual outsider quality to occultism.” How do you define the occult?

Occult is a term that comes from Latin—*occultus*, meaning hidden or secret. It came into use during the Renaissance when religious scholars were looking for a means of referencing the spirituality of the pre-Christian world, which was being rediscovered to great effect. This included the spiritualities of Ancient Egypt, Ancient Persia, Greece, Rome, North Africa, which abounded across what we consider the Western world for millennia. These were polytheistic, seasonally based spiritualities, often involving deity worship and methods of divination, symbolism, what we might call spell-work.

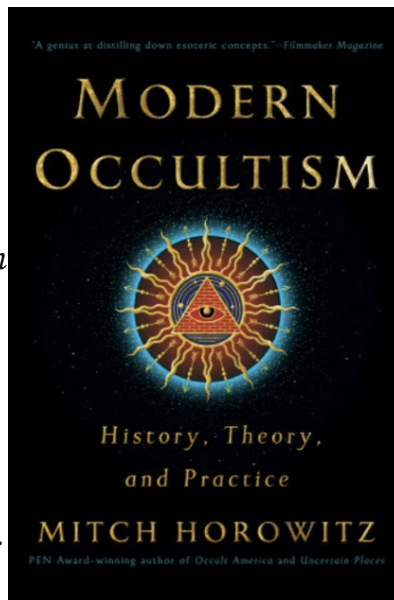
We who live in the West occupy a strange cultural situation where the entire spiritual life that animated the existence of men and women across those vast regions flourished for millennia and largely disappeared, first with the advent of Christianity and later Islam.

It’s a peculiar situation. If a person lives in India, and grew up as a Hindu or a Buddhist, there’s a continuity present that’s largely unknown throughout the West. Our religious traditions were interrupted by a vast schism, and a massive cultural and historical amnesia has taken hold ever since.

Occultism seeks to draw upon and adapt fragments that we’re capable of accessing of ancient, pre-Christian spirituality, and those fragments are reshaped with novelty, new

additions, new inventions, and attempts to reanimate ideas from antiquity.

In both your first book, *Occult America*, and in *Modern Occultism* you look at the history of the occult in this country. You don't gloss over the horrors perpetrated on American soil but you do credit the United States for being, at best, a sort of spiritual safe haven, a place that allowed for a relatively unique degree of religious experimentation. Some of this experimentation ends up intertwined with progressive political movements, including Spiritualism, which was in many ways an early feminist movement.



One of the great ironies of American life—maybe the central irony, as this was going on institutionally during the centuries of slavery and the destruction of Native American culture—is that the nation has been a fairly safe harbor for religious experimentation.

The modern Spiritualist movement began in 1848 in Hydesville, in central New York's Burned-Over District, where two teenage girls, Kate and Margaret Fox, made the first widely publicized reports of being able to elicit spirit raps. This movement gave birth to seance circles, the attempt of Americans to contact unseen intelligences.

Whatever one makes of that prospect, as soon as the public began to form into seance circles and Spiritualist clubs, there arose a perceived need for mediums, the vast majority of whom were women. As Spiritualism took shape and produced its own newspapers, lecture societies, clubs, and metaphysical churches, female mediums were very often at the helm of leadership. It became the first outlet through

which women could serve as religious and, to an extent, civic leaders in American life.

The Burned-Over District was not only ground zero for some of this religious experimentation, but was also the locale in which the Woman's Rights Convention was held at Seneca Falls in 1848, about forty miles down the road from Hydesville.

It seems so diffuse to connect these two things and yet the connection is very plain and natural. Almost any woman who wanted a voice in the religious and civic culture for about two generations in the nineteenth century gravitated toward Spiritualism. You couldn't find a medium who hadn't spent time within the suffragist movement, and vice versa: many suffragist activists had spent time within Spiritualism.

Figures like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, who later in life was an atheist and freethinker, were involved in Spiritualism, as were many other figures whose names are not as widely known, including Victoria Woodhull, who ran a protest campaign for the presidency on the ticket of the Equal Rights Party in 1872. She was the first woman in the U.S. to run for the presidency, more than a generation before women received the right to vote.

The story of occultism and progressive politics in America—while it diverges as you get deeper into the twentieth century—at its inception point is very intimate and intertwined. Movements and ideas that opened people up to greater conceptions of self—whether or not one is sympathetic to those conceptions—usually out-picture into the broader culture and social movements that also open up human possibility.

You also discuss particular links between the occult and abolitionism and Black radicalism. One distinctly American example is hoodoo. Can you talk about hoodoo and Frederick Douglass's connection?

In all three of Douglass's memoirs, he writes about an incident that occurred in his life when he was around fifteen. Douglass identified this as the pivot point of his life, the awakening of his political and social consciousness.

He had been relegated to a farm in rural Maryland, where he was in bondage to a brutal slaveholder. He was being so abused that he escaped and went back to the keepers of his old household in Maryland, begging them to take him back in. They refused and sent him back one night, bloodied, starving, and terrified.

Douglass was hiding in the woods, pondering what to do, and was happened upon by a man named Sandy Jenkins. Jenkins, Douglass wrote, was known as an old African medicine man, also an embondaged man, but someone who had retained some of the old ways.

Jenkins gave him a root, which Douglass referred to as "the magic root"—that's the term he used—and he told him, you must carry this root on your right-hand side all the time, and no white man will be able to abuse you. Douglass said he didn't really believe in such things, but he was desperate. He took the root, returned to the farm, and he and this slaveholder got into a physical fight and the man couldn't get the better of him. Douglass said it was at that moment that he was free in an inner sense, and he would be free as a physical fact as soon as circumstances permitted.

Although he never mentions it by name, it's evident from the source material that he was referring to the African-American magical system of hoodoo, which is a syncretic, occult system that draws on certain traditional beliefs from Central and West Africa, and combines that with folk and religious beliefs found in America. You'll find within hoodoo not only fragments of retained African belief, but aspects of Pennsylvania German folklore, Kabbalah, Catholicism, and Native American folk magic. In a sense it really became the nation's first truly combinative religious faith. Hoodoo, which is spelled lowercase, is often confused with the Afro-

Caribbean religion of Vodou—but hoodoo has a distinct lineage all its own.

You've written widely about New Thought and mind-power philosophies. These philosophies have a somewhat regressive reputation today, something I know you take issue with, in part because of their working-class, socialist origins. Where did New Thought come from?

New Thought is an umbrella term for the mind-metaphysics movements that grew out of Transcendental New England starting in the mid-to-late-nineteenth century. The gambit was that thoughts have a selective or causative quality. New Englanders were particularly interested in this apropos of physical health because medical care was in shambles throughout America—this was one area of the sciences where the U.S. lagged behind Europe.

In today's world, precincts of progressive culture are often very disdainful of New Thought, seeing it through the lens of the book and movie *The Secret* or other popular expressions. People feel like it's a grand delusion that distracts us from the more concrete issues of life. What gets lost in this critique is that this movement in the early twentieth century was very much in march with progressive movements.

One of its chief purveyors was Wallace D. Wattles, who wrote a book called *The Science of Getting Rich* in 1910, which ironically was one of the primary sources of inspiration behind *The Secret*. Few know that Wattles was a socialist activist who ran for office three times on the ticket of Eugene Debs' Socialist Party.

Elizabeth Towne, a pioneering publisher and progressive activist, was another such figure. These people saw themselves as democratic socialists, as suffragists, as people committed to the march of progress. They perceived New Thought as a quiver in the bow of social rebellion. They perceived the individual as a center of creativity whose thoughts and actions could serve to upend an unjust social order. New Thought was seen as a liberating tonic to people

who were searching not only for independent means of living, who not only had anarchic or socialist sympathies, but who yearned to break out of the conformity of daily life. New Thought was a countercultural movement.

In the popular imagination the occult is often linked to the right—we think of Nazis, of fascist esotericists like Julius Evola. You question this, writing: “There exists today, in both academia and on social media, willful overestimation of the extent to which occult themes were present or doted upon within Nazi circles.” This said, you are also blunt about following these connections where they do exist. To what extent do you see a link between fascism and the occult?

I’ve described occultism as a revivalist movement of ancient religious forms and symbols, so when fascistic or other kinds of totalizing political movements draw upon ancient heraldry, they’re drawing upon symbols of a pre-Christian world, sometimes Egyptian, sometimes Hellenic, sometimes Vedic in nature. Such imagery looks familiarly “occult” to us.

The greatest figure of the occult revival was the Russian world traveler Madame H.P. Blavatsky. In 1888, she published her magnum opus, *The Secret Doctrine*, within which she used the Vedic symbol of eternal recurrence, the swastika, which the Nazis later ripped from its moorings and pirated into a symbol of exclusionary national renewal. The occult revival was felt throughout a vast range of movements in Europe in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, movements that fell both on progressive and retrograde sides of the political scale. Many different political actors, as well as artists, clipped and pasted from Blavatsky’s work, sometimes divorced from her original meaning.

These connections are real and have to be talked about and understood. But very often these ideas were brutally torn out of their original context. I write extensively in the book about the many and multi-varied ways in which the Nazis brutally

suppressed every expression and personality associated with occultism.

To take a different example in history, the hammer-and-sickle itself that demarcated the Bolshevik movement was designed by artist and mystic Yevgeny Kamzolkin, who was involved in occult circles in Russia. He drew those symbols from Slavic and Nordic spirituality, the hammer belonging to Svarog, the thunder god, the sickle belonging to the Earth goddess Mara.

Where I plausibly see the link to the occult is in the idea that there is something inherently magical in fascism, which I mean almost literally: it's like a spell. You quote Carl Jung, who says: "Hitler's power is not political; it is magic." I think there's an attempt to grasp this "power" by figures like Evola in the mid-twentieth century, and today by people like Alexander Dugin or Steve Bannon. To what degree do you think that thread of mysticism through twentieth-century right-wing movements endures?

I suppose the question that you're raising is whether there's some sort of intrinsic link between nationalism and esotericism or occultism, in a way that goes beyond some of the use of symbols that I've been describing.

I have to wrestle with that question. Leftist politics are largely materialist in nature—they see the world hinging on economic and cultural questions. That's a legitimate analysis. The right-wing analysis is interested in culture and economics as well, probably more so culture, and locates some sense of human identity and personhood that it wishes to promote as being based in the spiritual. Going back to the French Revolution, there was a split between popular political movements of the left and the power of the church.

I can understand the analysis that sees mysticism as a blinder. I also see so many exceptions that I don't think it can be elevated to the point of a categorical imperative or definitive connection.

Trump professed an interest in the Reverend Norman Vincent Peale, at whose congregation he was confirmed as a teenager. Peale became world famous for writing *The Power of Positive Thinking*, which re-processed some of the mind-power metaphysics that I was referencing earlier through biblical language with which the churchgoing American public was comfortable.

People talk about Trump's capacity for reality distortion and I have probed the question of whether that has its roots in some way in the positive-mind culture that he drank in when he was part of Peale's congregation. It's not altogether clear to me that he's read *The Power of Positive Thinking*, but he's certainly made admiring reference to Peale.

It would be fraudulent of me to dismiss these questions and not to sit with them and not to feel tormented by them. Because they are real. If I wanted, I could mount some polemical rejoinder to the claim of there being an intrinsic connection between mysticism and the right. I'll do that only to a certain point, because if I carry it out too far, then I just become a kind of catechist, someone waving a flag for a topic in which I'm interested.

My objection is: I don't want such connections exaggerated to the point where they eclipse historical actuality.

Mysticism aside, the dominant religious movement on the American right today clearly is Christian fundamentalism, which is certainly not sympathetic to the occult. You recently sent me a story about anti-Masonry in QAnon, which is apparently alive and well. Can you talk about QAnon and the Satanic panic?

I wish the Satanic Panic was relegated to our past. It was a movement that swept through media and law enforcement in the eighties and nineties and identified a wide swath of "Satanic ritual abuse" playing out in America. It was later discredited as complete fantasy, and vast numbers of lives were ruined in lawsuits based upon fallacious claims of Satanic abuse cults. All the while, children were being

abused in what were considered some of the most upstanding institutions in American life, specifically the Boy Scouts of America and the Catholic Church. It's typical across all societies that abuses occurring in the mainstream are shunted to the margins and scapegoats are selected on the margins as purveyors of the evil that is actually going on all but in plain sight.

You and I have discussed the fact that a couple of years ago in Poughkeepsie, New York an act of homicidal arson was committed against a house occupied by members of the Church of Satan, which was burned down. The perpetrator has never been caught. Two people in the house escaped literally with just the clothes on their backs. This is sixty miles north of New York City. There's nothing remotely imaginary about the dangers of the Satanic Panic and conspiracist thinking.

Looking at the long trajectory of occult movements, particularly in the United States and Europe, they tend to arise historically—not universally, but often—as liberatory movements. In this era of rising religious fundamentalism worldwide, is there anything leftists or those with progressive sympathies can draw on from this history?

I think there are two dimensions to that. First, space has to be made for radical selfhood that considers itself progressive. You don't want to paint with so broad a brush that you wipe out the experience of millions of people who may participate in some form of popular spirituality who also have a great many progressive impulses. You don't want to create a cultural atmosphere that tells those people they are relegated to the dummy category because they're engaged with popular forms of mysticism or self-help or whatever term a person wants to use.

The other dimension is that movements that prove personally liberatory—which I think occult spirituality certainly has—usually give birth to social counterparts. I've referenced some of them. And they can also give birth to regressive counterparts. It's almost a tabula rasa. People

approach these movements not only seeking values but also bringing their own values to them, and the two tend to intermingle.

I can certainly say that we have numerous experiences in American history—abolitionism, various forms of progressive economic reform, suffragism, early Black nationalism—that had very deep hereditary ties, culturally speaking, to occult or esoteric movements, which sought spiritual expression outside the parameters of accepted religious tradition.

There's no reason to assume that that process has stopped today. I can look to my own life as an example of its perpetuity. I'm deeply interested in questions of economic justice just as I'm deeply interested in protecting the individual search for meaning. To me, those two things are like my right and left hands. They're fundamental and foundational parts of my life and I can't imagine that my experience is wholly exclusive.

*Will Solomon writes a newsletter, **Nor'easter**, on climate and environment in the Northeast US. He can be found on Twitter and elsewhere at [@wsolol](#).*

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